



UNDER DEVELOPMENT

David Robinson proves that the age of chivalry isn't dead as he packs his wife off to deal with Mr Mean while he gets the easy life with Mr Nice

Not that you can tell by looking at it, but this month's column was produced using an entirely different method from usual. Normally it's down to the mundane use of Microsoft Word on my Sony Vaio notebook. Recently, however, I've found that even using a notebook I'm carting more and more stuff around with me, to the point that my bag can't cope with it all. I have two notebook bags: a posh Samsonite one that cost an arm and a leg and a TechAir rucksack type that came from PC World. I prefer the TechAir. I've had it for five years, it holds masses of stuff, is tough as nails and the zips are unburstable – even the way I overstuff it. But the time has come to try to cut down on the clutter I carry around.

While on the road I've gone minimalist and am trying to get by with just my Palm Zire 72. For most tasks this works OK, but a document as long as this is impossible to do using the pop-up keyboard and stylus. I've therefore added a Freedom keyboard from www.expansys.com. It's one of those ingenious types that unfolds from nothing into a full-sized QWERTY keyboard and, as it's a Bluetooth device, it doesn't need any wires. Coupled with the Documents To Go software that came bundled with the Zire, it's usable and portable.

Overall it's on a par with the JVC sub-notebook I used for a while last year, giving about the same kind of battery life between recharges (around two to three hours of continuous use) for a fifth of the price. The documents are Word compatible and Documents To Go also copes with Excel spreadsheets, which is great as my notebook copy of Excel has gone completely doolally and is permanently stuck in Region Select mode.

SHORT ORDER

Regular readers could be forgiven for thinking that my life is one continuous trial, having to deal with people with the IQ of an amoeba, or alternatively that I'm making it all up. The truth is that many of our customers are just Mr Ordinary and, very occasionally, we get one like Mr



Nice, a shining example of good manners, organisation, consideration for others and clarity of thought, and best of all he doesn't query his bills and pays up on time. Sadly, writing about Mr Nice wouldn't make for particularly good reading and I'd soon be getting a rollicking from Mr Editor. As for making it up – well, you couldn't, could you?

This month I've been doing a job for Mr Nice while Mrs R, poor thing, has been dealing with Mr Flash and Mr Mean. The first time I dealt with Mr Mean (a Lancastrian), we had a meeting to discuss the system he needed. It took an hour to agree the technical details and another three to sort out the price. He wanted a discount. My stance was that if I could have quoted a better price I'd have done so from the start, but he wouldn't accept that. By the fourth hour I was getting fed up and finally relented by offering the smallest token reduction I thought he'd accept. Feeling that he'd won, he reached across the table (no mean feat for him), shook my hand and said, "I don't normally deal with bastard Yorkshiremen, but I'll make an exception in your case".

The table was a problem for Mr Mean because he's extremely vertically challenged. At our first

meeting I hadn't realised he was so short until he walked out from behind his desk. I'd thought he'd been sitting down. He had a cold and walked to a cupboard from which he extracted a box of tissues, removed one, separated the two plies of the tissue, tore one of those in half and put the rest back in the box for later use.

FAMILY AFFAIR

Mr Mean's business is a family concern started by Grandfather Mean many years ago. As was his wont he had many offspring who begat more offspring and their building business grew and grew. I suppose it had to with so many mouths to feed. As the Means are an enterprising lot, they also branched out into associated trades so the business now includes selling materials and services, too. Each of the significant third generation of Means manages a section and there's a lot of inter-department rivalry. As often happens, there's trouble at t'mill and they're all at odds with one faction thinking their section is contributing more than the others, and they can't all be right.

Mrs R installed their accounting system 10 years ago and supports the staff through the convoluted

departmental (actually just make that mental) way of allocating costs. If they buy a pack of toilet rolls, for instance, the invoice has to be split between the departments so that they each stand their share of the costs and the department profits are reported 'accurately'.

Mr Flash is Mr Mean's sidekick and was probably the role model for David Brent. Whenever he leaves his desk, for instance, he always carries a clipboard or folder, whether he needs to or not, so everybody thinks he's busy, important and doing something. The clipboard even goes with him when he uses the toilet. How do I know? He passed this on to me as a tip so that people would think I was important like him.

SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE

Anyway, things have recently come to a head and each Mean wants to take his ball home. They want to split the one big company up into six smaller businesses, with each Mean paddling his own canoe. Which means splitting up the computer system, with all its integrated functions, into six separate systems. Lucky Mrs R.

Our Mr Mean is looking forward to paddling his own canoe and has big plans. One includes a new website. He doesn't want us to do it, though, as that would be far too costly. He and Mr Flash have devised a cunning plan. They're going to employ a college leaver with good programming, systems analysis and graphics design skills to do the website, which will include links back to the stock database and have secure online ordering facilities. The cunning bit is that they plan to pay him the minimum wage.

Actually, the really cunning bit is that when this person's not programming the high-tech website, he'll also get to help out loading the lorries. If any of you are bright enough to see the flaws in this line of thinking, drop me an email and let me know what they are. ☹

CONTACT

DAVID ROBINSON

david@computershopper.co.uk